

Navigating the Path to Viability: Lessons in Adaptation and Strategy from Si Sa Ket's Community Enterprises

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Abstract

This study examined the viability and sustainability of Community Enterprises (CEs) in the border areas of Si Sa Ket Province, Thailand, with particular attention to the operational, financial, governance, and market-related challenges that shaped their long-term survival. Using a qualitative multiple-case study design, data were collected from 60 key informants across selected Community Enterprise areas through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and document analysis. The participants included community leaders, local residents, Community Enterprise committee members, Community Enterprise members, and community committee members. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns of challenge, adaptation, and strategic response.

The findings revealed four major factors that influenced CE sustainability. First, external support strengthened initial capacity but also created dependency when it was supply-driven and short-term. Second, transparent and participatory governance was essential for building trust, accountability, and collective action. Third, market orientation was necessary for transforming local products and cultural resources into sustainable economic value. Fourth, intergenerational collaboration was critical for linking traditional knowledge with digital skills and future succession. Based on these findings, the study proposed a sustainability framework built on four core pillars: adaptive external support, participatory governance, market-oriented value creation, and intergenerational capability development. The study contributed practical insights for policymakers, development agencies, and community leaders seeking to strengthen rural Community Enterprises in peripheral borderland contexts.

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Research Objective

To thoroughly analyze the main issues, flexible solutions, and strategic planning techniques of Community Enterprises in Si Sa Ket's border regions in order to compile useful insights and create a framework that improves their long-term viability and sustainability.

Introduction

Community Enterprises (CEs) have been perceived as effective tools for grassroots and local development, empowering local communities to reduce poverty and to preserve and develop community-based cultural identity and heritages, in line with broader community interests. CEs are embedded in social networks and address a wide range of social, cultural and community needs and interests. They reflect and embody community-based social organization, local knowledge and innovation and cultural values and practices. Therefore, CEs are small economic ventures with social goals; they require community involvement and participation, and operate to promote collective benefits that serve broader community interests. Seen from a theoretical perspective, CEs are hybrid social enterprises and combine goals of economic efficiency and growth, social well-being, cultural preservation and community development and empowerment.

In the Thai development context, the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) is an important conceptual base for sustainability of Community Enterprises. While Western resilience theory is useful in explaining how community enterprises survive, innovate and grow under difficult circumstances, an alternative perspective is provided by the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy which guides moderate, reasonable and safe development with provisions for self-protection through knowledge and morality. The concept of sustainability of Community Enterprises therefore can be interpreted within the framework of SEP principles such as moderation, reasonableness, self-immunity, adequate knowledge and morality. This study attempted to explain sustainability of Community Enterprises integrating SEP and Western resilience theory, their processes of adaptation, learning and change and transformation to development and improvements.

The socio-spatial context of Si Sa Ket Province, a country's inland centre of a Thai-Cambodian borderland, provides a unique setting for this study. Unlike CEs in non-border rural areas, community enterprises in Si Sa Ket have to operate under circumstances that are affected by borderland dynamics, both positive and negative. On the positive side, potential cultural exchange, tourism, product differentiation and the utilisation of shared cultural heritage as cultural capital offer chances for CEs to create value from local products, traditions, ethnic identities and borderland experiences and stories. These can be transformed into distinctive market value in different markets, particularly in tourism, handicrafts, local food and community-based cultural experiences. However, CEs in Si Sa Ket are also confronted with challenges stemming from their location in a peripheral border region, such as a lack of access to essential infrastructure, stable markets, logistical structures and digital platforms and adequate institutions. This study examines how CEs in Si Sa Ket Province handle the tensions between their social mission and market-oriented strategies for survival.

The borderland dimension further enhances the relevance of social enterprise hybridity in the peripheral areas. Although rural Community Enterprises seek to serve the community, at the same time they have to be financially sustainable in order to deliver more services to their members. Hybridity in the CEs is therefore pronounced in so far as they struggle to serve several goals at once: profiting from their businesses, maintaining and supporting cultural heritage and unique local identity, enhancing community involvement and supporting government's rural development agenda, and competing on the market against for-profit businesses. In border provinces, including Si Sa Ket, enterprises with potentially competitive products and services encounter handicaps, both operational and spatial, that derive from their locations on the border. Therefore, the sustainability of CEs in Si Sa Ket cannot be explained by the production capability and community orientation of the CEs alone. Rather, sustainability must be understood in relation to the interactions of three sets of factors: place-based cultural capital, borderland market conditions, and governance and support arrangements, as well as strategies for adaptation pursued by CEs.

Community Enterprises (CEs) and social capital have been viewed as effective means for rural livelihood improvement. However, previous studies on CEs have paid little attention to how such organizations adapt to changing socio-economic situations, particularly in peripheral borderland areas of Thailand. The literature has concentrated on general success factors, the roles of institutions and organizations in supporting CEs, and the economic outcomes generated

by CEs. There is a particular need to examine how the borderland location of CEs influences enterprise hybridity, market-orientation, governance and sustainability. This study focuses on Si Sa Ket Province in northern Si Sa Ket as a case study site to explore how CEs in a rural border region develop adaptive strategies to enhance their sustainability. The cultural resources available in the community, peripheral logistics, external development interventions and community-based entrepreneurship are the key factors driving CEs in the area.

To address this knowledge gap, the study adopts an integrated framework combining the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, resilience theory, social enterprise hybridity and community capital perspectives. Employing this approach, the study analyses the sustainability of Community Enterprises in border areas of Si Sa Ket through in-depth case studies. The analysis examines the elements that facilitate sustainability, specifically the mobilisation of local community capital; the acceptance and effective utilisation of external support; ability to adapt to unpredictable external markets; effective management of internal governance practices; and adequate knowledge transfer to new generations of operators. The paper also seeks to move beyond simple categorisation of enterprise success or failure and instead explains under what circumstances a community enterprise adapts to survive while others fail to do so.

This study aims to identify major problems of operational, financial, governance and competitive issues that affect Community Enterprises in border provinces of Si Sa Ket. It also seeks to explore their adaptation strategies and based on the empirical findings develops a framework for sustainability of community enterprises. The study connects Socio-Ecological Production Possibilities (SEP) framework with resilience theory to explain sustainability of community enterprises in a Thai borderland context. The findings can provide useful implications for policymakers, development agencies and CEs' stakeholders to enhance effectiveness of community enterprises in rural periphery. The balance of cultural value and social mission and market orientation in rural setting are significant factors to be considered.

Research Methodology

This study aimed to explore the viability and sustainability of Community Enterprises in border areas of Si Sa Ket Province, Thailand. A qualitative, multiple-case study methodology was utilized in the study. Three Community Enterprise areas in the study area were chosen as cases for in-depth examination as they represented different socio-economic characteristics and also different organizations in term of enterprise types and development phases. By examining the

challenges faced, the responses made and the ways in which they coped with problem to sustain themselves, their operational challenges and coping strategies, the governance structure of the enterprises and how entrepreneurial they were in terms of market orientation, the study was able to draw comparison among the cases and shed lights on differences and similarities.

The sample population consisted of the stakeholders, comprising the individuals directly involved in or impacted by the Community Enterprise operations in those areas. The sample consisted of 60 key informants, twenty informants per Community Enterprise area, including three areas. The key informants were selected from the sampling frame using criterion-based purposive sampling approach. In other words, the informants who were directly or indirectly involved in the Community Enterprise, have experience related to Community Enterprise operations, community development, local governance, and community participation were selected.

The key informants were organized into five groups: community leaders, local residents, Community Enterprise committee members, Community Enterprise members and community committee members.

Table 1

Key Informants by Area and Participant Group

Case area	Community leaders	Local residents	CE committee	CE members	Community committee	Total
Area 1	4	4	4	4	4	20
Area 2	4	4	4	4	4	20
Area 3	4	4	4	4	4	20
Total	12	12	12	12	12	60

Note. CE = Community Enterprise. The distribution may be adjusted slightly according to actual community roles while maintaining the total of 20 participants per area and 60 participants overall.

Research Findings

The complex factors, which influenced the paths taken by the four studied Community Enterprises (CEs) of Si Sa Ket; Ruen Mai Herbal Products, Ban Suay Community-Based Tourism Initiative, Khao Klang Organic Growers Group and Sila Hom Weaving Cooperative, have been thematically extracted and presented in four major themes. The themes specifically reveal the double-edged role of external support, the internal governance and the gendered dynamics of leadership, market myopia and strategic adaptation, and the generational divide and succession

imperative. The study, therefore, illustrates that sustainability of CE depends on a combination of factors including production capacity and the interactions between external support, internal governance, market learning, intergenerational collaboration and the ability to convert community resources into economic value. These four cases and four themes were the basis for the original study findings.

Theme 1: The Double-Edged Sword of External Support

External support from government agencies and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) appears to play a paradoxical role in promoting and developing the Community Enterprises. On the one hand support can generate initial momentum, facilitate better techniques, supply new inputs and gadgets and even motivate members temporarily. However, such support can create dependency by being supply driven rather than demand driven, lacking linkage with market and having a limited duration. As a result, it is possible to speak of a project-induced capacity bubble. During the period of the support the performance of an enterprise can appear to improve but as soon as the project ends, the support, the mentoring and the institutions vanish leaving the enterprise to its pre-project state. This observation corresponds with critiques of participatory development that argues externally driven interventions can undermine local agency when they do not strengthen long term capacity and ownership.

Focusing on three cases, Ruen Mai Herbal Products, Khao Klang Organic Growers Group, and Sila Hom Weaving Cooperative, this paper analyzes why production support provided by NGOs often fails to lead to sustained impact. During the period of support, these groups received materials and tools to improve production techniques, or short-term project funding for specialized activities such as product design. They also received technical training, often confined to a brief workshop or visit. Yet, the support did not extend to assistance with strategic planning, market access, or financial management. Consequently, the groups were unable to continue their production after the support had ended. For example, the Khao Klang Organic Growers Group collapsed because the group came to rely on low-priced inputs and market connections promised by the NGO. Eventually, the group lacked funds to repay loans and to pay farmers for their produce. Ruen Mai Herbal Products learned how to better package and present their products as a result of NGO support, but were unable to sustain this level of quality using their limited internal skills and financial resources. The paper concludes that this pattern of aid stems from development programs that stress short-term production outputs over organizational learning and local adaptation, and that ignore the impermanence of external support.

In contrast to the material-focused support for Ban Tha Meun, the support for Ban Suay Community-Based Tourism Initiative inspired a more robust movement for autonomy. Rather than simply building a facility, support in this case entailed mentoring, business planning, market linkage, and community participation. Support facilitated community members' analysis of local resources and identification of unique strengths and selling points and directly connected them with larger tourist markets. In contrast to the three cases above, external support in this case inspired development by building local agency rather than taking it over. This finding is consistent with the capability approach, which emphasizes development as a matter of increasing the capacity of individuals and groups to make choices that enhance their well-being and dignity (Sen, 1999). The four cases may be positioned along a Dependency–Autonomy Continuum as follows:

Position on Continuum	Community Enterprise Case	Main Pattern
High Dependency	Khao Klang Organic Growers Group	Relied heavily on external inputs and promised markets; collapsed after support declined
Moderate to High Dependency	Ruen Mai Herbal Products	Improved during project support but struggled to sustain gains after funding ended
Moderate Dependency	Sila Hom Weaving Cooperative	Developed production skills but remained weak in market access and strategic autonomy
Higher Autonomy	Ban Suay Community-Based Tourism Initiative	Used external support to build planning capacity, market linkage, and self-directed adaptation

The continuum ranged from assistance which concentrated on equipment and short-term gains, fostering fragile capacity, to support for business development that focused on learning, networking and gaining market intelligence, to promote greater adaptability and autonomy. This finding is consistent with the view that sustainable development interventions should be treated as learning processes rather than as one-off hardware transfers (Chambers, 1997; Korten, 1980; Sen, 1999).

Theme 2: Internal Governance, Leadership, and Gendered Authority

These findings were also extended to internal governance, suggesting that CE sustainability is also greatly influenced by the quality of internal governance practices. Sustainable CEs possessed effective internal governance, characterized by transparency, joint decision making, clear division of roles and financial accountability. Unsustainable CEs, by contrast, were marked by a culture of centralization, informal financial practices, small involvement of members, and an unstable organizational structure. This finding is consistent with the institutional and collective action theories that define the factors that contribute to sustainable group action including rules, trust, reciprocity and accountability (North, 1990; Ostrom, 1990; Putnam, 1993).

A common thread in these cases was what we came to call the benevolent leader trap. When groups began to organize their production for export, they tended to center decision-making, financial management, communication with buyers, and problem-solving around a respected leader. This leader took on a central role in Sila Hom cooperative management, overseeing production coordination as well as external contacts. In the case of the Khao Klang growers' group, the leader took on all responsibility for financial management and was even the sole point of contact with buyers. At first, such leadership brought much-needed stability and direction. However, in the long run, this trap meant that Sila Hom and Khao Klang failed to develop shared leadership and learn from each other. We saw in these cases how overly centralized leadership in local institutions can create serious vulnerabilities to continuity when that leader is no longer able to manage the group's affairs. This is a problem that has been identified in the agricultural extension literature, and is related to the concept of hidden bias in organization (Uphoff, 1986; Pretty, 1995).

Leadership in rural Thai Community Enterprises is shaped by gendered perceptions of leadership. Community Enterprises in rural areas are often based around women's traditional skills and knowledge, for example in weaving, food processing, herbs and community-based tourism. In many cases, women are responsible for much of the practical production and day-to-day management of the enterprise. However, formal leadership roles and external representation can be influenced by a variety of gendered perceptions of leadership at local level, including those that reflect broader national and global gender equalities agendas. These studies found that women leaders were perceived by others, including members of the Community Enterprise and external stakeholders, to be trustworthy leaders because they were seen as caring, patient and responsible. They were able to build strong reciprocity and emotional trust with members.

However, the studies also found that women leaders often became ‘mother-like’ or ‘caretakers’ of the enterprise, concentrating responsibility in one person. This was seen as natural and appropriate. The findings relate to broader understandings of social capital, where trust and shared norms can facilitate collective action, but can be fragile if they are primarily based on personal relationships rather than institutions (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 1993).

Social norms around gender shaped attitudes to trust and centralization in Natural Resource User Groups. Many members reported that female leaders enhanced group cooperation because they were seen as reliable, moral and community-focused. However, female leaders who did not combine these qualities with transparent institutions around rotation of roles, financial reporting and succession planning risked being drawn further into the benevolent leader trap. This finding highlight that the issue is not female leaders per se but rather the lack of institutional translations of individual trust into effective governance. Consistent with Ostrom’s (1990) findings, these institutions involve rules, accountability and monitoring by several parties.

Ban Suay Community-Based Tourism Initiative showed a more sustainable approach to governance. Members had formalized their roles and made participatory and transparent decisions regarding spending of profit. Trust was transferred from a dependence on personal relationships to mechanisms of shared financial control, transparent financial books and regular discussion meetings. These elements facilitated member participation and assured that the rural enterprise could realize benefits from tourism for community development. The model for successful rural enterprise management revealed here transferred from personality-based leadership to system-based leadership and recognized gendered divisions of labor and authority. This approach is consistent with good governance principles as described by the World Bank (1992) and corroborated by other social sciences theories including institutional theory (North, 1990) and common pool resource theory (Ostrom, 1990).

Theme 3: Market Myopia and Strategic Adaptation

Themes Three describes a divergence between production-focused Community Enterprises (CEs) and market-oriented enterprises. Whilst a number of the CEs included in this research possessed local knowledge, cultural capital and production skills they did not achieve sustainable ‘value’ from this talent. This can be seen as a form of ‘market myopia’, whereby production-driven enterprises have insufficiently considered customer needs and tastes, pricing, brand positioning, supply-chain and market narratives and competitive advantage.

The Sila Hom Weaving Cooperative manages stands and sells woven products from its community. Every woman in the community is a weaver, retaining traditional methods and patterns. Yet, while their product does have quality, the issue lies in its inconsistency in size, price, design, and function making it hard to compete in other markets. Similarly, the Khao Klang Organic Growers Group practicing organic farming is not enough; the group lacks branding, certification, and market storytelling which fails to project the added value of their product to receive the corresponding higher price. High quality does not automatically translate into market success for community enterprise products. The value must be positioned, communicated, and perceived by consumers in the market.

In contrast, the Ban Suay Community-Based Tourism Initiative had developed a strong strategy for the “Silk & Forest Experience”. Rather than just offering another generic homestay, the group had drawn on local resources including the forest ecology, the silk heritage and the skills of the elder weavers, local cuisine and community history. These resources had been combined and communicated through storytelling, cultural performance and walk in the forest, through photography, word of mouth and use of social media to create high perceived value for a niche market of tourists interested in culture, nature and community learning. (Barney, 1991; Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

The case reveals that CE sustainability depends not only on making good products but also on identifying and matching market opportunities, mobilizing local resources, and satisfying shifting customer needs (Teece, 2007). Unlike other successful CEs who focused on making good products that automatically would appeal to consumers, Ban Suay experiences demonstrated that cultural and natural capital could be transformed and offered as attractive experiences for consumers. This case illustrates that CE viability depends on market orientation, customer awareness, product differentiation, telling of stories that matter to customers, and the capacity for innovation in both a commercial sense and within larger livelihood and sustainability frameworks.

Theme 4: The Generational Divide and the Succession Imperative

Community Enterprises (CEs) are intergenerational community-based groups where older members hold tacit knowledge, cultural memory and/or production and technical skills that have been passed down through generations. However, they struggle to apply these skills to update their traditional marketing through digital channels such as websites and social media, e-commerce, accounting, financial management and online customer engagement. This capability

gap between members' inherited knowledge and the skills required for effective digital marketing, limits the potential for rural people to move out of economic marginalization and address the rural digital divide (Heeks, 2002; World Bank, 2016).

Members from the weaving and herbal product groups were mostly older community members who were not able to access online markets. In contrast, the younger members of the community have tended to migrate to urban areas in search of stable and secure income, career progression and greater opportunities for social mobility. However, the Ban Suay Community-Based Tourism Initiative has shown that youth migration does not necessarily mean long-term disengagement. With CEs that allow for flexible participation, with opportunities for earning income, with space for digital innovation and creativity, and with a focus on local identity, young people can be encouraged to return to their rural community. (Todaro, 1969; Scoones, 1998)

Success at Ban Suay came from turning generational differences into a community strength. Elder members taught the cultural traditions, stories of local history, and intricate details of traditional weavers' work while younger members managed the social media, dealt with customers, took photographs, wrote content for online promotions, organized tours, and managed various booking systems. This division of labour was an embedded succession strategy as young people could gradually learn, become involved, and share the tasks. It decreased the risk of intergenerational knowledge loss and increased the ability of the community enterprise to adapt.

Creating sustainably functioning Community Enterprises (CEs) for environmental sustainability requires more than equipping community members with technical knowledge to manage natural resources effectively. It also necessitates an organizational design and structure that assigns significant economic value, social status, and identity to the engagement of youth. When tradition is combined with technology; social capital with governance systems; and the wisdom of experienced elders with innovation pursued by youth, communities create conditions conducive to sustainability. Berkes & Ross (2013), Folke (2006) and Flora & Flora (2013) see social capital and communal-level governance as crucial indicators of sustainability, while Flora & Flora (2013) and Putnam (1993) suggest that local organizations and social connections, respectively, give youth a meaningful and identity-forming role.

Recommendations

To enhance sustainability of Community Enterprises (CEs) promotion in Si Sa Ket, support to CEs must gradually shift from supply-oriented focusing on money, materials and equipment for

immediate operation, to more process-oriented, long-term, and community-centered capacity building. Government agencies, NGOs, universities and other development organizations can play key roles by offering CEs on-going mentoring support in the form of facilitation of ongoing problem identification, planning, testing and evaluation, reflection and review, and planning adjustment cycles. The ultimate goal is to strengthen CEs' critical thinking skills as well as their ability to manage finances, design and market products, and engage in adaptive planning.

CEs should be encouraged to test products, services and marketing concepts in a 'market sandbox' a low-risk, pilot-scale environment before they are scaled up. For example, weaving groups could develop and test some small lifestyle products such as scarves, bags and souvenirs with some customers. Herbal product groups could test packaging and/or product combinations at local fairs, online or in partner shops. Tourism enterprises could test and develop short experiences and trial them on small groups before upscaling. Data and analysis of customer feedback, costs, prices and sales should be recorded to inform the decision-making process.

Another aspect to be strengthened for increasing CE sustainability is internal governance. Each CE should set up simple operational systems (e.g., on leadership, financial accounting, decision-making, profit distribution, scheduled meetings, and leadership succession). These would encompass regular member meetings and monthly financial reports. The CE leader should further distribute leadership across committees (or functional roles: finance, production, marketing, documentation, and contact with third parties) in order to avoid dependence on a single leader and to create shared responsibility.

Moving from an output-orientation at the policy and institutional levels, that is, moving away from focusing on short-term outputs such as production levels or training completion, programmes supported at the provincial and local levels should adopt a multi stage funding approach that starts with diagnosis and planning, followed by piloting, market testing and scaling up after evidence of concept has been gathered. Support criteria under the Community Enterprise Promotion Act and similar development strategies at the provincial levels should include criteria such as good governance, community participation, transparency in financial reporting, testing of market value and utilization of local resources and lessons learned during implementation.

In addition to basic digital literacy support, also provide support to design, photograph and upload products as well as manage an online store. Establish local or district / provincial level Community Digital Hubs where crafts can be photographed and products uploaded, where stories of crafts and producers can be captured, where customer service can be provided, where

online payments can be facilitated and delivery arrangements made as well as where data analysis can take place. This will be particularly helpful for older producers and traditional craft makers who can benefit from market access but may not have the skills to manage online aspects of their business.

We also propose the development of Intermediary Social Enterprises which would facilitate CEs connection to digital marketplace, tourism websites, universities, private companies, and logistics services etc. These intermediaries could assist CEs in the processes of branding, product packaging and standardization, online marketing, customer service, and negotiation in markets. Inter-generational collaboration should also be integrated into the sustainability plan of CEs. Young participants can assist in digital communication, tourism management, online sales, product design, and visual storytelling. The elder members will provide cultural knowledge, training, and quality control. Associating these roles with income-sharing or incentives would make them meaningful and attractive for involvement of different generations, fostering a combination of traditional skills and modern practices for sustainability.

In order to support the sustainability of CE's, support should move beyond the enterprise itself and encourage the development of sustainability-oriented networks at the local level. These networks could be created by partnerships between agencies at the provincial level, educational institutions, local governments, private sector organizations and community-based organizations. A Community Enterprise Learning Network for Si Sa Ket could organize a product testing fair, cross-case studies, mentoring, online and offline market days. These support structures would allow CEs to gain access to knowledge, skill and market opportunity. Long term they could help CEs transition from a project to a sustainable, market and socially oriented enterprise genuinely rooted in their community.

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